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SUBJECT: ARAB LEAGUE BRIEFING ON DAMASCUS SUMMIT

REF: CAIRO 569

Classified By: MINISTER-COUNSELOR WILLIAM R. STEWART  
REASONS: 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary Arab League Chief of Staff Hisham Yousef briefed diplomats on the Arab League Summit (held in Damascus March 29-30) on March 31. Yousef said that the tone of the summit was "conciliatory," but acknowledged that Arab-to-Arab relations have become frayed on a number of fronts and this will require "continuing attention." On Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the summit's "Damascus Declaration" essentially adopted previously stated Arab League positions. Yousef said that the intra-Palestinian dispute (i.e. the Palestinian Authority and Hamas) also remains in play, with no clear solution. Next year's summit will be held in Qatar. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Yousef told local diplomats that the summit had been a success "despite major difficulties" in preparation. Ultimately, a generally conciliatory tone was struck, and the summit completed an agenda that included the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Lebanon, Comoros Islands, Somalia, and Sudan as well as Arab cultural, social and economic issues. He said that next year's summit will be held in Qatar.

¶3. (SBU) Yousef acknowledged that rehabilitation of Arab-to-Arab relations had been of paramount concern to SYG Moussa, and was extensively discussed at the summit. In preparatory meetings, the participants had requested SYG Moussa prepare a paper on the subject for submission to the heads of state. Moussa's paper advocated for additional attention and work to address "volatile Arab relations," and recommended a follow-up meeting. Yousef opined that the coming weeks will see either a continuation of the "spirit of conciliation" among Arab states or a reversion to "escalation on a number of fronts that might ultimately lead to violence or war."

¶4. (SBU) Yousef faced direct questions from European diplomats as to poor attendance by heads of state: was it the result of arm-twisting by "outside actors," and had Arab League stature been damaged? Yousef said attendance had been a "sovereign decision" by all Arab League states. As for Arab League credibility, he said that the picture was mixed. On the one hand, the media had scrutinized the absence of "key heads of state" (e.g. President Mubarak and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia). On the other, all delegations had presented their opinions, and only one country (Lebanon) had declined to attend (note: Lebanon non-attendance was reportedly the first time an Arab League member state had declined to attend an Arab League summit. End note). The summit participants approved an increase of Arab League funding by 33 percent - a positive development. He noted that the OIC, African Union, and United Nations delegations delivered remarks at the open session. In addition, the Iranians (FM Mottaki), Turks, Chinese and Europeans (Marc

Otte) had attended.

15. (C) Yousef highlighted the following issues:

- Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Yousef said that the summit participants agreed to maintain the current Arab League position with respect to the Arab Peace Initiative (API). It should remain on the table for now, but if Israel "intransigence" continues, the Arab League may conclude that Israel has constructively, if not expressly, rejected the API. Yousef said that the summit participants complained that little progress has been made following the Annapolis summit. He expects that some progress will be made before the President's expected trip to the region in May, and said that an Arab League ministerial will be held, likely in the summer, to review developments. If progress "remains poor," the Arab League may decide to consider "alternatives" to the API. (Note: In private conversations, Yousef has told us that one such option might be for the Arab League to declare the two-state solution unviable and to pursue a "one state" solution. Yousef has not provided specifics and recognizes the serious pitfalls associated with this approach, but has said that support among Arab League member states for something along these lines is growing. End note).

- Intra-Palestinian dispute: The need for Palestinian unity was discussed. The Arab League was appreciative of the Yemeni initiative to bring Palestinian factions closer together, but did not endorse the plan. Yousef said that PA President Abu Mazen's main demand remains a return to the pre-June 2007 conditions (reftel). However, he said that Hamas continues to argue that this should include the return of the National Unity Government with Ismail Haniyeh as Prime Minister. Yousef deemed this unlikely, but said that

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returning security leadership that was in control of Gaza prior to June, 2007, was equally unrealistic.

- Iraq: No significant changes to the Arab League position. Yousef noted that the ongoing fighting in Basra has colored the discussion slightly, and the Arab League called for an immediate stop to the "bloodshed in Iraq." He acknowledged that the Iraqi delegation pressed for greater recognition of the continuing problem of terrorism by the Arab League.

- Lebanon: The summit participants agreed that the Arab Initiative remains the best mechanism to address the political impasse, and that Moussa would continue his efforts. The absence of the Lebanese delegation muted discussion. Yousef told us privately following the meeting that there are no firm plans for a ministerial to address Lebanon, although SYG Moussa had said it remains a possibility.

- Other issues: "Islamophobia," especially in light of the upcoming release of the Dutch film by Geert Wilders, received considerable attention. Yousef said that the Arab League was working with the OIC to formulate a position that both respected freedom of religion and guarded against defamation of religion. In response to a question from the Dutch DCM, Yousef said that he was confident a "middle ground" could be found with western governments and media, but that it would require work. An economic and social development summit would be held in Kuwait in 2009; an Arab League/South African summit will be held during the last quarter of 2008.

16. (C) Comment: Yosuef told us following the briefing that "the nightmare is over," referring to the painstaking preparations for the summit. He seemed exhausted, and grimaced when we asked when he and SYG Moussa might return to Lebanon. SYG Moussa and Yousef have worked hard to raise the profile, and the relevance, of the Arab League. For now, it seems they may have succeeded in the former, but not yet the latter.

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